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ABSTRACT

The assumption that readers understand best and respond most positively to writing and illustrations which reflect their own first-hand experience was tested. To elicit response from children, four books by Byrd Baylor were used in three classes of fifth graders, in urban, suburban, and rural schools. After the books were read and the pictures shown, the students filled out a form asking them to rank order the books and indicate whether they would choose to read the book again on their own. The students were asked to write a preference statement when all the books had been reviewed and discussed. The fact that the books represented both a geographic area and lifestyles unlike their own did not seem to interfere with the students' participation. In each location the children chose a different book as most highly ranked. In the urban and rural groups, the book "Desert Voices" received more yes than no responses to questioning about desire to read the book again. In looking at a quantification of the comments made about the favorite books they chose, in both the rural and urban school comments were evenly split between text and illustration comments. In the suburban group, comments were much more heavily text rather than picture oriented. The study suggests that teachers can choose to use picture books with older students and need not limit the books only to those depicting the children's own lives. (A review of each book used is attached.) (MG)

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Children's Response to Books About the
American Southwest

by

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It is a common writing instruction shibboleth that authors write most effectively about their own first-hand experiences. Does it also follow, by extension, that readers understand best and respond most positively to writing and illustrations which reflect their own first-hand experience? This conference provided an opportunity to test out this assumption in using with children some books about the American southwest.

The collaborative work of Byrd Baylor, author, and Peter Parnall, artist, provided the children's books to be explored with youngsters. For a long time these two have worked together, producing many books about the southwest which have been widely praised by children's literature experts. Huck (1987) called the books "well-written and attractive," while Norton (1987) described them as "strikingly presented." Reviewers in periodicals have similarly praised the books commenting positively on both text and pictures, though in fact some reviewers have raised questions about the books' ability to communicate with child readers. The books have been praised, for example, as "spankingly attractive and splendidly attuned," but at other times have been criticized as, for example, "a technical triumph without great joy." (Excerpts from representative reviews are included in the Appendix.) Do these books, lauded by adult experts, also appeal to children? There is ample evidence that adult and child taste differs (Terry, 1974).

Materials

Four books by Baylor and Parnall were used:

Desert Voices (Scribners, 1981),
The Other Way to Listen (Scribners, 1978),
The Way to Start a Day (Scribners, 1978), which was named a Caldecott
Honor Book, and
Your Own Best Secret (Scribners, 1979).

Procedures

To elicit response from children, the books were used in three classes of fifth graders, in urban, suburban, and rural schools. All children in class took part in each one hour lesson, though some of the research data

was gathered and is reported from a subset of the total group. On two days, two of the books, presented in random order, were used. The books were read as the pictures were shown by the researcher, and at the conclusion children were encouraged to discuss their reactions to both text and pictures. After one book was read and discussed, children filled out a form asking them to rank order the book on a 5 point continuum from "very interesting" to "very dull." They also indicated whether they would choose to read the book again by themselves. After this, the second book was read and discussed and the form filled out. On the third and final day the four books were briefly reviewed, and children commented on what they noticed about each book. Then, the question was explored: "Why might someone choose a book as their favorite?" Children gave reasons for a preference and these were listed on the board, in two categories: visual reasons and text reasons. Following this, children were given time to write their preference statement. All four books were available so children could consult them if necessary. Students were encouraged but not required to write about both text and pictures as reasons for choosing. They were told to use any words they wanted, not worrying about spelling which would be corrected later, so that mechanical considerations would not limit their expression.

Rank Order Responses

Data in this section are reported from all students, a total N of 75 (43 male and 31 female). The following rank orders are based on adding together the two most positive response categories ("very interesting" and "somewhat interesting"):

Rural (N=28)

Desert Voices	11
The Way to Start	7
Your Own Best	7
The Other Way	6

Suburban (N=18)

Your Own Best	10
Desert	8
The Other Way	8
The Way to Start	6

Urban (N=29)

The Other Way	15
Desert Voices	14
Your Own Best	12
The Way to Start	9

The following rank orders show preference by sex:

Boys		Girls	
Desert Voices	22	Your Own Best	16
The Other Way	17	The Other Way	12
Your Own Best	13	Desert	11
The Way to Start	13	The Way to Start	9

When we compare boy and girl total scores for the four books, we find boys are more positive than are girls for all the books except for Your Own.

The second type of data gathered on the forms was a response to the statement, "I'd choose to read this book again." The yes results were:

Rural

Desert Voices	15
Your Own Best	7
The Other Way	6
The Way to Start	5

Suburban

Your Own Best	8
Desert Voices	7
The Other Way	6
The Way to Start	4

Urban

Desert Voices	15
The Way to Start	10
The Other Way	10
Your Own Best	9

Next, we compared the number of positive responses to negative ones (meaning the child would not choose to reread the book). In the rural and urban groups, only one book, Desert Voices, earned more positive than negative responses. In the suburban group, no book received more positive than negative responses to the statement.

When this data is analyzed by sex, these results were obtained:

<u>Desert</u>	Yes	No
Boy	26	18
Girl	12	18

The Other Way

Boy	14	26
Girl	8	24

Your Own Best

Boy	15	27
Girl	10	21

The Way to Start

Boy	12	31
Girl	7	22

Across all four books, boys a total of 67 times replied yes to the question of rereading a book, while 102 times said no. In contrast, girls replied yes a total of 37 times, and no 85 times.

Choice Responses

To do the more extended analysis of written reasons for choosing a particular book, we selected samples from a subset of the total group. The sample children were chosen before the study began by each classroom teacher, who was asked to identify 5 each in high, medium, and low language use groups, for a total N of 15 in each class. This way of choosing subjects is recommended by Dyson (1984). As a result of this pre-study identification of students, we had a very evenly divided group of 45 Ss: rural (7 male, 8 female), suburban (6 male, 9 female), and urban (8 male, 7 female).

Analysis

To analyze this data, three different language measures were used; two are quantity while one is a quality measure. We tallied the number of sentences generated, and the total number of words generated. These two quantity measures are often used as rough estimates of language maturity (Loban, 1976).

The quality measure, a type/token ratio, is often used by language researchers (according to Jensen, 1973) as an indication of language maturity. This reports the number of different words (called types) per given sample (called tokens). The researcher chooses the number of tokens to be used (in this case, 50 words) and then crosses out every repeated word. What is left is the type-token ratio, an indication of language diversity. For example, 25/50 is a less diverse sample than 36/50. Analysis of the language generated showed the following:

<u>Rural School</u>	<u>Low</u>	<u>High</u>
Number of Sentences	1	12
Number of Words	26	167
Type-Token Ratio (50 words min.)	31	47

<u>Suburban School</u>	<u>Low</u>	<u>High</u>
Number of Sentences	4	10
Number of Words	36	122
Type-Token Ratio (50 words min.)	33	45

<u>Urban School</u>	<u>Low</u>	<u>High</u>
Number of Sentences	2	10
Number of Words	42	147
Type-Token Ratio (50 words min.)	29	46

In the final session, when children chose one of the four books and wrote about their reasons, which books did they select? We found the following:

Rural

Desert Voices	7
Your Own Best	7
The Way to Start	1
The Other Way	0

Suburban

Your Own Best	6
Desert Voices	4
The Way to Start	3
The Other Way	2

Urban

Desert Voices	8
Your Own Best	4
The Way to Start	2
The Other Way	0

In addition to choosing, Ss wrote the reasons for their choices. To facilitate fluency, a discussion period was held as described earlier. What sorts of comments did children include? Each piece of writing was read, and the sentences categorized to determine if the child was writing about text or pictures. The analysis showed:

	Text Comments	Picture Comments
Rural school	39 ¹	38
Suburban	41	17
Urban	31	37

Children made many different kinds of text-related comments:

Rural School

Text comments

1. characters	10
2. general ("It is well written.") ²	5
3. plot ("She found all the notes he had left.")	4
4. animal narrators	4
5. setting	4
6. page layout ("She writes in columns because she wants to have more room for pictures.")	3
7. number of topics ("I like books that tell about only one subject.")	2
8. link to child's own experience ("William had his own stuff, and I would like to have my own if my little brother wouldn't steal them.")	2
9. amount of words ("There was a lot of reading but that's ok.")	2
10. time	1
11. vocabulary	1
12. author	1

Illustration comments

1. color ³	17
2. general	5
3. objects/places shown	5
4. concealed objects	5
5. amount of detail	2
6. realism	1
7. time of day	1
8. comparing pictures to others in book ("It's interesting how some pictures are almost the same and some are super different.")	1
9. relations between objects ("Another reason I like this book is she shows how big mountains are to people.")	1

Suburban School

Text Comments

1. general	7
2. specific details ("She tells you things that couldn't happen and you normally wouldn't think of.")	7
3. topic "I love animals.")	7
4. link to child's own experience	7
5. about the author ("She has a very imaginative mind.")	4
6. plot	2
7. page arrangement	3
8. characters	2
9. compare to other books ("All the other books were about one thing repeating over and over again.")	2

10.	book page arrangement ("On the title page and dedication page he drew it and you found out he meant to continue it.")	1
11.	setting	1
12.	presentation ("It was read with a lot of expression.")	1

Illustration comments

1.	color	5
2.	concealed objects	5
3.	general	2
4.	design	2
5.	realism ("The pictures are so real it makes you feel like you're right there.")	2
6.	page layout ("I like where she puts the pictures.")	1

Urban School

Text Comments

1.	plot	8
2.	general	6
3.	link to child's own experience	4
4.	point of view ("I like that the animals are doing the talking.")	4
5.	page layout	4
6.	amount of detail	3
7.	named animal ("My favorite was the lizard because you had to look closer.")	2
8.	mood ("It was a calm book.")	1
9.	parts of book ("The title fits this story.")	1

Illustration comments

1.	color	17
2.	concealed objects	6
3.	size of objects ("She made the sun small then big at another time.")	3
4.	general ("I chose this because of the illustrations.")	3
5.	amount of detail	3
6.	objects/places shown ("I like how she drew William Cottonwood's place.")	2
7.	overall quality ("The pictures are bright and cheery.")	1
8.	changes in illustration throughout book ("The faces of the sun are different in each picture.")	1
9.	agreement ("The pictures show what the words tell.")	1

Conclusions

The children in these three fifth grades participated with enthusiasm, orally and in writing, when encouraged to interact with four books highly regarded by children's literature experts. The fact that the books represented a geographic area, and lifestyles quite unlike their own did not seem to interfere with the students' participation.

The rank order data, gathered from the total N of 75 Ss, presents a mixed picture: in each location, rural, suburban, and urban, the children choose a different book as most highly ranked. Rural children chose Desert Voices, in which individual animal narrators tell briefly of their everyday lives. Suburban children chose Your Own Best, a praise poem for having a secret place, that begins in the southwest, as all the books do, but also talks about secret places in a variety of other locations in this country. The urban children chose The Other Way, which is set in the southwest and focuses largely on the positive relationship between a young girl and an old man.

When this ranking data is reorganized by sex, we find boys most often ranking Desert Voices most positively, while girls ranked Your Own Best most positively.

Children were also asked if they would choose to reread these books again. In the urban and rural group, the book Desert Voices received more positive than negative votes. The suburban children responded less positively than the other groups: no book received more yes than no votes.

When this data was analyzed by sex, for all four books, more boys responded yes than did girls, though in fact boys' and girls' no votes outnumbered yes votes for all the books except one. In Desert Voices, boys' yes votes outnumbered their no votes. It is clear from this then, that the books, while stimulating children to talk and write about their responses during the class activity, did not fare well as books children would on their own pick up and read again.

A second part of the data gathering involved students in choosing a favorite from among the four books and writing about their reasons. The writing from a subgroup of 45 Ss was analyzed. This choice data revealed things about children's ability to generate language, about the most often chosen books, and about the types of reasons children give when choosing.

When we consider the quantity and quality of the language generated, results are similar to those in a study which used different schools (Stewig, in press). The language urban children generated was very comparable with the language generated by rural and suburban children though urban children are widely thought to be less skilled in using language than are other children. For these urban children, the use of picture books was an effective stimulus to written language.

When choosing, both rural and urban groups preferred Desert Voices, while the suburban students chose Your Own Best. In looking at a quantification of the comments made, in both the rural and urban school,

comments were quite evenly split between text and illustration comments. In the suburban group, however, comments were much more heavily text rather than picture oriented.

The range of the comments is wide, despite the fact that talking about picture books isn't a regular part of the curriculum at this grade level in any of the three schools.

This project involved fifth grade students, an age older than that at which children typically study picture books in depth, with a sequence of lessons designed to explore responses to books about the southwest. The visually unfamiliar geography, as well as lifestyles unlike their own, did not prevent these children from responding energetically both verbally and in writing. In the process, they provided data which indicated that children can choose with sureness and write articulately about reasons for choices. The study suggests that teachers can choose to use picture books with older students, and need not limit the books only to those depicting the children's own lives.

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Appendix

Each of the four books used was well reviewed when first published.

1. *The Other Way to Listen*

"This paeen to silent sounds...is expressive and insinuating, as the Baylor-Parnall collaborations always are....(b)ut the picture-pages are cold and all-too-calculating, the images both ambiguous as to form and literal as to meaning..." (*Kirkus*, V. 47, #3, February 1, 1979, p. 119.

"The artist's distinctive settings and strong, beautiful portraits...set in pages of varied design, the book is a tribute to the idea that spareness is effective. The flowing sketches with minimal lines are brightened by the addition of yellowish orange; the short text does not have an unnecessary word. (*Horn Book*, V. 55, #3, June 1979, p. 291)

Another reviewer had limited praise:

"A technical triumph without great joy, this is a cold, graceful book ... for most children, this narrative of tuning in will not be ... exciting...." (*School Library Journal*, V. 25, #8, April 1979, p. 39.

2. *The Way to Start a Day*

"...strikingly illustrated...this book offers exciting possibilities...and help(s) sensitize children to the beauty of their world and their language..."(*Reading Teacher*, V. 32, #8, May 1979, p. 974)

"Though urging a return to simpler societies' obeisance to nature has become a pious cliché,...Baylor can still make the invitation as newly compelling as the rise of each day's sun....Parnall's decorative style....his crisp lines and sun colors are still spankingly attractive and splendidly attuned." (*Kirkus*, V. 46, #15, August 1, 1978, p. 805.)

"The author's sensitive, singing prose will certainly convince readers....Parnall's glittering paintings alternative between swirling shapes in the vibrant hues of the sunrise and strong, equally stunning geometrics...." (*Publisher's Weekly*, V. 214, # 7, August 14, 1978, p. 69)

"The vertical columns of Baylor's prose poem....sit unassumingly outside the dry brightness of Parnall's spreading scenes; his stiletto lines insinuate themselves forcefully into part real/part fantasy...in full accord with the surety and aplomb of the text. No new directions...but stunning nevertheless." (*Booklist*, V. 74, # 22, July 15, 1978, p. 1731)

3. *Desert Voices*

"...achieves a clarity and beauty that surpasses even some of their own best work.... The essential nature of each animal... is conveyed with simplicity and energy in the well-phrased text and is further illuminated in Parnall's drawings....bold and delicate. Rich colors used sparingly, careful choice of detail and striking page design all focus attention on the animals while conveying a larger sense of its being. The pictures are less convoluted and the ideas less esoteric than some of the previous collaborations, so that this is more accessible and appealing to children." (*School Library Journal*, V. 28, #1, September 1981, p. 104)

"Baylor's prose has, as usual, a certain mesmerizing quality....but there is no connection between the segments except for the reverential tenor of the whole (which somewhat blunts the intrinsic survival message) ... youngsters who've responded to earlier ... collaborations will likely find the combination of the precise and the impalpable, common to both text and pictures, affecting in this instance, too." (*Kirkus*, V. 49, #12, June 15, 1981, p. 733).

"Baylor and Parnall, whose names are nearly synonymous with picture books on the desert, take another unique look at the arid world with these evocative poems.... The stiletto lines of the drawings reflect the sharp contours of the land...." (*Booklist*, V. 77, #21, July 1, 1981, p. 1393)

4. *Your Own Best Special Place*

"This tribute to solitude is sensitively interpreted in earth-tone illustrations. The combined artistry of Baylor's words and Parnall's illustrations has never been more effective." (*Childhood Education*, V. 56, #3, January 1980, p. 168)

"... warmer and more human than ... *The Other Way to Listen* This part of the story is totally absorbing and evocative. But the book goes on--a little too long--as ... the girl think(s) about other secret places ... illustrations are as fastidious as ever But despite its grand Southwestern set, this book should have been scaled down to better suit the secret, nestling subject." (*School Library Journal*, V. 26, #6, February 1980, p. 42)

"Still another intense evocation of the impalpable ... the pictures are if anything more dematerialized than ever--large areas of undifferentiated color, a few slopes of line, some tiny, remote figures--and so, with the involuted text, the outreach is minimal, the sheltering comfort of a 'secret place' nil." (*Kirkus*, V. 47, #16, August 15, 1979, p. 931)

"Parnall's sweeping vistas suggest the majesty of spaces... and they echo the poetic telling by Baylor who shares a dear experience....in a gently-touching text that will go straight to the heart of child

readers who cherish their particular private havens." (Publishers Weekly, V. 216, #10, September 3, 1979, p. 96.

"....captured the essence of a very personal discovery and in wistful, gentle tone, expresses the significance Parnall's familiar, thin, reaching lines have the sharpness of an etching; they converge in a novel way to build the unique perspectives that make his work striking. Use of wide space forces attention to the heart of each illustration and emphasizes the aloneness of the characters. Carefully controlled shadings...are....effective and emphatic; the uncluttered look suits the quiet, reflective tone of the prose." (*Booklist*, V. 76, #4, October 15, 1979, p. 348.)

Endnotes

¹Throughout this section, numbers do not necessarily total the subject N indicated above, as Ss were encouraged to write as many different reasons for their preference as they wished.

²Exemplary comments are included in this first section; additional comments are given in succeeding sections only for new categories.

³There seem to be three kinds of comments about color:

- a. quantifying ("There should have been more color.")
- b. describing ("I like all the light colors.")
- c. naming ("The sun was yellow.")

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